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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the integration of instructional technology (IT) in a Web-assisted, first-semester composition course at Middle Tennessee State University, particularly the use of interactivity tools for in-class and cross-class collaboration. Beyond the benefits of making course materials available 24-7 and linking students via email, IT allows teachers to develop assignments that capitalize on electronic small group activities promoting process-based composition instruction. Emerging best practices from the teacher and students' perspectives revealed through surveys over three semesters are also presented. General rules for in-class and cross-class peer groups, as well as a copy of the student survey, are appended. (Author/MES)

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Eighth Annual
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Effective IT Integration in the Composition Classroom: Instructor and Student Perspectives

By: Maria Clayton
Track 1 - Effective Technology Based Learning Environments
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Abstract

A Middle Tennessee State University instructor of a web-assisted, first-semester composition course examines her integration of instructional technology (IT), particularly the use of interactivity tools for in-class and cross-class collaboration. Beyond the obvious benefits of making course materials available 24-7 and linking students via email, IT allows teachers to develop assignments that capitalize on electronic small group activities promoting process-based composition instruction. Emerging best practices from her and her students' perspectives revealed through surveys over three semesters are also presented.

Proceeding

In the composition classroom, effective use of instructional technology (IT) includes any application of technology that contributes to practicing and improving writing skills, to bringing students together in communities of student-centered learners through greater interactivity, and to promoting technological literacy. How can writing assignments be structured to integrate IT to meet these purposes? What are the benefits and drawbacks of these assignments as perceived by students and faculty? How can the use of IT be rethought and revised to capitalize on the former and minimize the latter? These critical issues should be at the forefront of composition instructors' planning and developing pedagogically sound assignments using IT.

Beyond the obvious benefits of making course materials available 24/7, beyond what can be accomplished by linking students via email, IT allows composition teachers to develop assignments that capitalize on electronic peer group activities to promote key aspects of the composition process. Instructors can integrate discussion boards and file exchange features, among other tools, to be used for a variety of composition instruction purposes. In so doing so, students benefit by learning about or solidifying their understanding of a reading audience and by becoming adept at determining what revisions might be necessary for their writing to meet that audience's needs—thus, audience and the revision-centered writing process are both reinforced. For example, specially designated areas available through web-management software, such as CourseInfo and WebCT, make possible the electronic exchange of drafts or parts of drafts among peers, facilitate the peer response process, and even extend the dialogue over writing beyond the time allowed in the physical classroom, all without requiring additional face-to-face meetings. Going one step further and expanding these peer communities to include members from other, similar composition sections contributes to giving even clearer presence—physical and/or virtual—to the concept of audience for whom rethinking and revising of the writing might be necessary.

For several semesters, I have brought together two sections of computer-assisted, web-assisted English 1010, Expository Writing, at Middle Tennessee State University, making students' peer review teams cross each section's physical boundaries to include respondents from two sections of the same course. Students begin the semester's work, the first two essays, relying only on assigned in-class peers for feedback on their essays' second draft. Introducing them to the IT tools and the procedures to be used for peer work gradually, allows them to become competent before virtual communication among peers is the only type available. These peers constitute a first-level audience with whom they become familiar over the three-time-a-week, face-to-face contact shared during the early weeks of the semester. This frequent contact establishes a comfort level and willingness to accept their input—like that of siblings, friends, or roommates. However, by the third essay, my students' audience expands to include peers from the other English 1010 section, an audience they have contact with only over email and other IT communication tools (i.e. personal homepages). If convenient, as in the Spring 2002, Fall 2002, and Spring 2003 semesters, when the two sections met back-to-back (7:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m.), a physical meeting can be arranged. These two representations of their readership—physical and virtual—contribute to each writer's developing understanding of what details are necessary/interesting, what level of formality/informality is called for, what tone is appropriate. While making these choices, the writer's role shapes more clearly, and the writer's voice begins to emerge, leading the student closer and closer to developing his/her identity as a writer. This learning is vital for developing, improving, or honing writing skills.

According to Linda Meyers-Breslin in "Technology, Distance, and Collaboration: Where are These Pedagogies Taking Composition," "As we move students from private to public audiences, it makes sense to place students into the Net. There we can ask them to write in a space where anyone and everyone can read their

words, and students can exchange ideas in a more real world setting, with people situated in the real-world" (161-62). This concept is emphasized by the course's Essay 3 assignment, where, in addition to using a mix of in-class and cross-class peer members, I expand on the concept of audience further through other specifics of the assignment:

Your web-assisted, portfolio composition class will participate in a collaborative peer group project for students from your instructor's two sections of 1010 CAI Portfolio Composition. This assignment will expand your writing communities and further develop your ability to analyze and to adapt our writing to specific, targeted audiences. There is a strong possibility that the resulting collection of essays will be made available to prospective MTSU students and their parents, incoming freshmen, and CUSTOMS Student Orientation Assistants. Possible inclusion of selected essays on the CUSTOMS' website implies a worldwide audience interested in reading about our University and the surrounding community. [CUSTOMS is the name of our University's freshman orientation program.]

TOPIC: Now that you have had several weeks to adjust to your new role as a college student, it is time to explore what your college and the surrounding community have to offer its students. You will share that newfound knowledge with others in an informative essay of 550 to 650 words. You may choose one of two options:

- A profile of a campus program, publication, service, club, or place
- A profile of a place or activity in your campus' surrounding community

AUDIENCE/PURPOSE: Since your essay could be published in a collection posted on the Internet, anyone around the globe could read your essay, including future students for our institution. However, you will want to more specifically target readers at our University. The general purpose of your profile is to inform. Please assume that your target readers are first-year college students at Middle Tennessee State University who are unfamiliar with the subject of your profile.

However, what is even more critical, as Myers-Breslin points out, is not just to bring students and their writing to these spaces, but to structure assignments that involve them in a conversation about the writing (162). Her views parallel my thinking; hence, the inclusion of very detailed peer response tasks (See Appendix A), as well as, another beneficial aspect of these cross-class groups, the built-in element of collaboration. In-class members work as a team to respond to the writing from their cross-class peers. During this portion of the process, students dialogue about strengths and weaknesses they find in the writing in terms of audience, thesis, organization, detail, and a variety of other elements specified in the assignment. The collaboration strengthens peer response skills, builds confidence, and allows respondents to think about these very issues in their own writing—a very profitable exercise! One student comments, "I found the in-class and cross-class tools have helped me to develop a sense of belonging to a community. It allowed me to see other students' writing and would often show me ways that I could improve my writing." Yet another claims, "The most beneficial

part of the forums was the ability to see other peoples' writing. Also, the questions on the peer response sheets helped me to think critically about the assignment."

But what else do students have to say about the use of the course's IT features? From these English 1010 students, I have received primarily positive and encouraging feedback through an informal survey on the effects of interactivity (See Appendix B) and through evidence of increased appreciation for the resulting collaborative exchanges. What are the benefits and drawbacks perceived by each of my two sections over the last three semesters? In terms of general website features, having access to course material earned very high ratings, with 97% of respondents seeing this feature as Critical/Useful, the two most positive ratings. Similarly, samples provided for modeling assignments and announcements that helped everyone stay on track received 100% and 86% as Critical/Useful respectively. External Links that provide assistance in various areas of the composition process, grammar, and mechanics attracted 69% in the same two highest ratings. Clearly, the students value the access-to-course-content benefits afforded them by the use of IT in the course.

In terms of the key issue of interactivity, the majority of my students has established small communities of writers and defines their primary goal as helping members improve their writing fulfilling all requirements of the assigned rhetorical situation and including expanding their concept of audience. Their rating for access to one another via email and discussion boards earned high marks—90% and 93% respectively in the two, most positive ratings, Critical and Useful; the remaining 10% and 7% fell in the Nice to Have rating, with no one describing them as Not Useful. Learning about each other via the personal web pages was rated as primarily Nice to Have, 45%, while 31% of respondents saw it as Not Useful. These last two ratings are understandable because most of these students do have face-to-face access to one another. In general, the increased access to peers and instructor alike (expanded classroom walls) was evaluated in positive terms as well through the comments provided: "Gives me access to a lot more than just the teacher . . . provides a sense of camaraderie between [sic] the students"; "More opportunities to get assignments done well"; "It helps me keep up w/homework & allows me to access my peers if I have a problem." Only a few exceptions, bemoaned the added effort expended: "there is too much to do just for writing a paper." In terms of the actual help received on their writing, again, the majority shared positive reactions: "Different people with different suggestions make me look at my paper as they are"; "these peers often give a different angle than the in-class peer"; "The community of writers come together and work as a team . . . give feedback in whatever way they can." Others demonstrated a concerned attitude about everyone's commitment to the process: "sometimes your peers didn't care and just jotted anything down"; "Sometimes students do not really put any effort into their comments about your paper." Indicating clear awareness of their needs in the composition process, these students acknowledged the potential absence of substantive content required for feedback to actually be useful; this drawback can be addressed with the whole class, as well as with individual students, as the course progresses through additional modeling and more specific requirements/guidelines.

A side benefit from integrating all these uses of IT tools is that my students gain and practice their computer technology skills. In this course, they walk away having participated in virtual communities, having given and received feedback on their writing, having created simple homepages, having practiced using attachments. When they complete the course, they have gained/increased their confidence in using IT, while capitalizing on the opportunities to work on their writing. In response to a prompt on the survey about anxiety in a web-assisted course (See Appendix B), one student comments, "I am computer illiterate and was worried about using a computer for class. The class helped me realize I can't make the computer blow up if I make a mistake." Another shares, "I came into the course with very little computer skills . . . . I have learned a lot." This is an important side benefit in improving students' ability to communicate. Some students even made a discovery not related to writing, seeing the advantages of posting writing and receiving virtual feedback as a paper-saving practice.

From a faculty perspective, I am encouraged by what I hear and read in my students' dialogue about writing. I am pleased to have wakened them to rethinking writing from a process carried out totally in isolation to one that not only considers audience, but also elicits feedback from it. I also like that they discover they are not the only ones experiencing problems with the composition process. All this re-thinking is a very good thing. Turning to the mechanics of the web-assisted course, I find that bringing all students to the necessary comfort level with IT is often a frustrating and time consuming process because, unfortunately, not all students come to me armed with the necessary tech skills to hit the ground running, even though the course is listed as computer-assisted in the semester's course schedule booklet.. However, establishing the comfort level is a necessary evil because IT's place as a tool rather than the subject matter for instruction must be clearly established. The more we expose our students to it, the more truly transparent it will become. While training time varies semester to semester, usually two sessions are sufficient to demonstrate and allow "practice" with all the basics. I also make available clear instructions, as well as access to me and to their peers as needed. The benefits provided for our purposes of establishing communities begin to materialize rather quickly as students from support groups for tech-related issues, but more importantly, for editing/revision suggestions and dialoguing about writing.

What does all this tell me, and what, if any, revisions will I make in the assignments I've developed using IT for my composition students? As I've mentioned, every semester I get feedback from my students through the survey (as well as through less structured dialogue) about what IT tools are most/least useful and about how they think the course needs to be improved to accomplish our goals of improved writing. I am always receptive to their suggestions and have integrated several of their suggestions. For example, to improve the quality of feedback received by student writers, I built in additional peer response mini-modeling sessions, focusing on the specific requirements for each assignment. I have also made available digital versions of the Peer Feedback Sheets, the Coversheets, and other materials to make the process more user-friendly. Additionally, I attend conferences and workshops regularly and engage my colleagues interested in similar pursuits in conversations about best practices; the exchange of ideas is profitable in both directions.

Karen Frankola, in "The e-Learning Taboo: High Dropout Rates in Online courses," suggests that following best practices in interactivity "not only creates a sense of community for participants; it also stimulates learning through discussing ideas and practicing skills . . . . [students] benefit from high interactivity with faculty and each other through exchanges like bulletin board discussions and e-mails" (16). IT integration to promote this dialogue should be implemented gradually, in increments. Instructors should not only have a clear sense of each component's purpose (not bells and whistles just for their own sake), but also have complete knowledge of how each works, to include anticipating student problems and how to address them. Then, in developing the assignments, detailed and clear directions and training time must be provided, to include the goals/rationale behind IT's use. With these simple suggestions in mind, implementation should result in a positive experience for students and faculty alike. Anytime we increase and deepen the dialogue about composition among our students, we move them towards clearer awareness of what constitutes good writing and towards improving their own. This should be the goal of a composition classroom integrating IT based on sound educational principles.

Works Cited

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Appendix A
Tasks for Peer Response Groups

Review this information prior to each peer response group.

I—The General Rules for In-class Peer Groups:

Writers should post to their Peer Group forum (Discussion Area of the website) the coversheet and draft #2 of the essay for peer group response (See the WebCT Intro for specific instructions on how to post).

Groups should start as soon as all members are present. Don't wait for your teacher to ask you to start. Class roll will be taken as groups work.

Groups must sit at adjacent terminals.

Groups must quickly come to order and get down to business.

Groups must give equal time to all members' work.

Everyone must participate.

TASK ONE--Oral Response (approximate time 30 minutes)

Group members greet each other and introduce themselves if they haven't already done so.

The first writer reads her/his own coversheet and essay aloud.

Peers listen carefully.

When the writer finishes reading, the group observes at least two minutes of silence while peers jot down reactions to the coversheet and essay. What works? What doesn't? What questions do you have? (You may use the Oral Response Form if you wish)
Peers give the writer their own reactions and answer the writer's questions.

Peers should complete steps 2-6 for each remaining writers.

TASK TWO--Written Response (approximate time 15 minutes)

Group members exchange essays (on terminals or hard copy).

Each member reads silently the essay of **one** of his/her peers and completes a Peer Response Sheet for the assigned essay (see the Communications Area of the website for all essays' Peer Response Sheets)
Respondents sign the Peer Response Sheet and return it to writers.

Writers quickly read responses to see if anything needs clarification.

IMPORTANT: When draft 3 of the essay is due, writers turn in peers' response sheets with their essays.

II—The General Rules for Cross-class Peer Groups:

Make initial e-mail contact once you have been assigned your cross-class peer

group; write down their names and select them through the Browse button in the Compose Message of the website's

Email area:

1. Send an introductory message to all peers.

2. Share some personal information (age, major, hometown, hobbies, and the like, expand on the info you have posted on the website) and give your topic idea for the essay.

Share coversheet and draft 2 of Essay 3 with your peer group via your Cross-class Peer Group forum in the website's Discussion Area:

1. Word process (use Word or Rich Text Format) the coversheet and draft 2 of Essay x and name them: i.e.: Essay x Coversheet or Essay x Draft 2.

2. See the WebCT Intro for specific instructions on how to post

Find and respond to your out of class peers' coversheets and essays:

1. **Working as a team** with your in-class peers, comment on the coversheet and answer the questions on the Peer Feedback Sheets.

2. Suggestion: one of you could have the out of class peer's files open on your computer, another could Reply to the message where you found the attachment. Respond to the prompts on the Peer Feedback Sheet, simply numbering the responses (no need to copy the prompts). Be sure to give complete and helpful suggestions. See the WebCT Intro for specific instructions on how to respond.

3. If time allows, offer feedback for the in-class peer, responding to pages 215-216 in *Portfolio* and giving them it to them for their records.

Find and print out the suggestions/feedback from your peer group through your WebCT Cross-class Peer Group; then, revise your Essay 3 draft 2 into draft 3 for submission to your teacher.

Group members can continue this exchange at each step of the composition process.

Students may also choose to send their drafts or portions of drafts to the entire class for feedback.

IMPORTANT: When draft 3 of the essay is due, writers turn in peers' response sheets with their essays.

Peer Response Groups--Tips for Success

Tips for Writers:

Read your piece and allow at least two minutes of silence after the reading for impressions to become clearer in the minds of your peers and to give them time to jot down reaction notes for oral response.

Do not rush the reading of your piece.

Ask the group questions about the content of your writing: "What other examples could I use to appeal to my teenage audience? Two sentences are not enough for paragraph three? What else could I say?"

Avoid defensiveness. Let the writing stand for itself and listen openly to the responses of the group members. This will help you revise later.

Do not quarrel with your group's reactions. Maybe what you see is truly there, and others do not see it. But maybe what they see is there, too--even if it contradicts what you see. Just listen, take it all in, and then make your own decision about what the writing needs.

Tips for Respondents:

Use active listening. Do not concentrate on your next comments; concentrate instead on what the speaker is saying. Tell what you think the writer is trying to say by either paraphrasing or summarizing the gist of what has been written. Have the writers read back some of their own words.

As the piece is being read, jot down words or phrases that catch your attention. What is it about those words that make them stand out? What parts of the piece do you like best? How do those parts work for you?

Take advantage of the note taking time after each essay reading and address: What works? What doesn't? What questions do you have? (You may use the Oral Response Form if you wish).

1. Respond to specific sections of the writing. A general response, such as "I like it" or "That's good," does not help the writer find ways to improve the writing.

2. Let the writer know if there is anything in the writing that seems confusing, out of place, or unclear. Explain why you are bothered by that particular section or item.

3. Ask the writer, "What part of the paper do you like best?" "What part was most difficult to write?" "How can the group help you?"

Appendix B

Engl 1010 CAI Portfolio Composition Interactivity Survey

The course I am currently taking offers expanded communication/interactivity through these tools (mark your selections), and I rate them as follows (mark your selections). To move from response to response, you can use the mouse and click on the desired spot or hit the TAB key after each option.

Semester

1)"24/7" Material Availability	Critical Useful Nice to Have Not Useful	2) Email	Critical Useful Nice to Have Not Useful
3) Website Announcements	Critical Useful Nice to Have Not Useful	4) Peer Group DB	Critical Useful Nice to Have Not Useful
5) Personal Home Pages	Critical Useful Nice to Have Not Useful		Critical Useful Nice to Have Not Useful
6) Sample Assignments	Critical Useful Nice to Have Not Useful	7) External Links	Critical Useful Nice to Have Not Useful

1. Does the use of interactivity tools help to **dispel anxiety** about the course—meeting requirements, engaging with the material, etc? yes no

If yes, which is the tool you found most helpful in this area and why:

2. Does the use of these tools help to develop a sense of belonging to a **community of writers** and dispel student isolation? yes no

If yes, which is the tool you found most helpful in this area and why:

3. **What was most beneficial** about using the Small Group DB forums for Peer Feedback work (both to extend in-class and to make cross-class possible)? Be specific (comments for improvement, questions for additional details, suggestions about format, etc.):

4. **What was least beneficial** about using the Small Group DB forums for Peer Feedback work (both to extend in-class and to make cross-class possible)? Be specific (tech problems, extra time, peers not holding up their end, etc.). Share some **suggestions** for how I might improve on this problems:

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